

Indian students rank 2nd last in global test

Across the world, India is seen as an education powerhouse - based largely on the reputation of a few islands of academic excellence such as the IITs. But scratch the glossy surface of our education system and the picture turns seriously bleak. Fifteen-year-old Indians who were put, for the first time, on a global stage stood second to last, only beating Kyrgyzstan when tested on their reading, math and science abilities.

India ranked second last among the 73 countries that participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted annually to evaluate education systems worldwide by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Secretariat. The survey is based on two-hour tests that half a million students are put through.

China's Shanghai province, which participated in PISA for the first time, scored the highest in reading. It also topped the charts in mathematics and science. "More than one-quarter of Shanghai's 15 year olds demonstrated advanced mathematical thinking skills to solve complex problems, compared to an OECD average of just 3%," noted the analysis.

The states of Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh, showpieces for education and development, were selected by the central government to participate in PISA, but their test results were damning. Tamil Nadu and Himachal, showpieces of India's education and development, fared miserably at the Programme for International Student Assessment, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Secretariat.

An analysis of the performance of the two states showed:

- In math, considered India's strong point, they finished second and third to last, beating only Kyrgyzstan
- When the Indian students were asked to read English text, again Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh were better than only Kyrgyzstan. Girls were better than boys

- The science results were the worst. Himachal Pradesh stood last, this time behind Kyrgyzstan. Tamil Nadu was slightly better and finished third from the bottom
- The average 15-year-old Indian is over 200 points behind the global topper. Comparing scores, experts estimate that an Indian eighth grader is at the level of a South Korean third grader in math abilities or a second-year student from Shanghai when it comes to reading skills.

The report said: "In Himachal, 11% of students are estimated to have a proficiency in reading literacy that is at or above the baseline level needed to participate effectively and productively in life. It follows that 89% of students in Himachal are estimated to be below that baseline level."

Clearly, India will have to ramp up its efforts and get serious about what goes on in its schools. "Better educational outcomes are a strong predictor for future economic growth," OECD secretary-general Angel Gurría told The Times of India.

"While national income and educational achievement are still related, PISA shows that two countries with similar levels of prosperity can produce very different results. This shows that an image of a world divided neatly into rich and well-educated countries and poor and badly-educated countries is now out of date."

In case of scientific literacy levels in TN, students were estimated to have a mean score that was below the means of all OECD countries, but better than Himachal. Experts are unsure if selecting these two states was a good idea. Shaheen Mistry, CEO of Teach For India programme, said, "I am glad that now there is data that lets people know how far we still have to go." (TNN 15-1-12).